Language-Learning Simulations: A Practical Guide

By Ken Hyland

Most teachers realise that the best strategy to encourage communication in a classroom is to remove the classroom. By creating learning situations that interest and immerse students we weaken the constraints of the classroom and encourage the development of communicative language use. This is the basic principle of language-learning simulations.

While teachers often use role-plays, some may feel that simulations will be too difficult to organise or too demanding for their students. This reluctance is understandable but ill-founded. While simulations require thought and planning, they come in all shapes, sizes, and levels of complexity and can be tailored to match the individual circumstances of a particular group. This article briefly covers some of the main issues by answering a series of questions. It describes what a language-learning simulation is, looks at some of the problems, and suggests how teachers might overcome them.

What is a Simulation?

Basically, a simulation is a problem-driven activity that occurs in a clearly described realistic setting. In a simulation students are given a task to perform or problem to solve together with the necessary background information and environment in which to do it. The learner responds to the task and acts within the constraints of the environment to complete it.

Most teachers are familiar with roleplays, and simulations share a lot in common with this technique. Both are interactive learning events, but generally roleplays involve learners taking on characters that are not their own, while participants in a simulation behave as themselves. They therefore apply their own background and first-language experiences to a situation. In addition, roleplays are often set up to practice particular language functions in a highly controlled context and are relatively simple and short. Simulations, on the other hand, provide a realistic setting for more extensive interaction in which students can get more personally involved.

While the accuracy of the modelling may vary greatly, all simulations centre on an explicit structure of information and require participants to assess and respond to a specified task. Students act as themselves and use their own judgements and linguistic resources while engaging in a variety of activities such as resourcing, discussing, and analysing over a period of time. The essential elements of a simulation are discussed by Jones (1982) and summarised in Figure 1.

Figure 1

1. **A simulated environment** -- the action takes place within a self-contained world with no

contact with the outside.

2. **A structure based on explicit "facts"** -- these are given to participants and do not allow intervention or change.

3. **A reality of function** -- participants have to accept the duties and responsibilities of their roles as if they were their own. (Jones 1982:4-6)

Why Use Simulations in Language Teaching?

More and more ESOL teachers are using simulations, because they are an ideal technique for allowing learners to use language creatively and communicatively. There seem to be five main advantages to language-learning simulations:

1. *Motivation*. Simulations encourage motivation because they ensure that communication is purposeful rather than artificial. Participants are involved as they identify with their roles and have the freedom to choose the meanings they want to express (see, e.g., Gardner and Lalonde 1990). Because students can bring their background experiences into class and make their own decisions, more interest and excitement is created in learning.

2. *Fluency development*. A tenet of communicative teaching is that people learn by doing (Allwright 1984). Fluency is encouraged in simulations because learners are immersed in a language-rich environment where language use is centred on immediate communicative needs. The context requires that language is subordinate to an activity, and so attention is focused on the situation rather than form-the communication of meaning taking precedence over the practice of language elements such as grammar and pronunciation. In a simulation, language use is an aspect of the communication necessary to perform tasks and not a test of correctness.

3. *Integration of skills*. A critical feature of a communicative methodology must be that it involves what Littlewood (1981:17) calls “whole-task practice,” the use of a range of language skills in realistic situations. Simulations provide the opportunity to learn the pragmatic skills of using language appropriately, to develop the nonverbal components of language, and to acquire intercultural and interpersonal competence in a second language. Participants learn that successful communication is a jointly achieved accomplishment involving a range of skills. Simulations can also help develop cognitive abilities such as analysing, evaluating, and synthesising information.

4. *Active participation*. Simulations provide a unique means of encouraging learners to respond actively and to participate with their fellows. Stevick (1976: 33-44) has argued that absorbing students in interaction encourages attention to input, an essential requirement for language acquisition (Allwright and Bailey 1991). Learning is more effective the more it engages the learner, and simulations seek to achieve this.

5. *Reduced anxiety*. Simulations reduce the stress associated with learning and using new language (Jones 1982). This is due partly to the shift in classroom roles and partly to the low cost

of making errors compared with error consequences in the real world. Not only do simulations offer a relatively safe environment for making mistakes, but they also promote an egalitarian atmosphere because there is no error correction to undermine confidence and divert attention to utterance form. Students are not judged, corrected, or evaluated, and this reduces their anxieties about linguistic performance, with a consequent improvement in achievement. Moreover, there is less stress involved in playing the role of someone else.

In sum, simulations motivate learners, encourage interaction, and provide opportunities for purposeful communication. In doing so, they encourage active participation in learning, assist retention, and give students a better understanding of communicative choice and linguistic complexity. In addition, the familiar focus on linguistic elements is replaced by an integration of linguistic and reasoning abilities.

How Do Simulations Relate to Current Teaching Techniques?

Simulations fit well with the recent emphasis on action learning and "tasks" as both a communicative instructional technique and a concept of curriculum planning (Candlin 1987; Nunan 1989). This is because they provide a means of integrating various tasks into a coherent and believable whole.

Essentially, a task is a complete communicative activity that involves learners in comprehending and using language while their attention is focused on meaning rather than form (Nunan 1989:12). Tasks have a particular objective, appropriate content, a specified procedure, and a range of outcomes. They are seen as a compelling and effective means for realising fundamental principles of communicative language learning, such as those discussed by Canale and Swain (1980), Widdowson (1983), and others who stress the importance of pragmatic aspects of communicative competence. In these terms, a simulation provides an optimal environment for communicative language learning. The technique offers teachers a means of setting up larger-scale tasks and creating a structured context for linking sub-tasks that involve data gathering, problem solving, or decision-making.

How is a Simulation Organised?

Simulations have a four-part structure: preparation, introduction, activity, and debriefing. This is set out in Figure 2.

Figure 2

Preparation	ensuring student familiarity and confidence with interactive learning assessing students' needs, interests, and abilities

	selecting or writing the simulation organising the room and gathering resources
Introduction	*Information input:* tasks, roles, background learners engage in information collection tasks *Language input:* useful lexis, structures, genres, discussion strategies, research skills, etc.
Activity	group discussions and work on tasks solution of problem or completion of tasks work arising from discussions, e.g., report writing or oral presentations
Debriefing (optional)	*Behavior:* task review, discussion of tactics employed, assessment of performance, possible discussion of cultural aspects *Language:* analysis of language used, discussion of errors, remedial work, further linguistic input

Preparation involves the teacher in assessing both student needs and abilities to ensure a suitable scenario and organising materials to provide authenticity. The second stage consists of information input. The participants are told what the task is, their roles, the nature of the situation, and any constraints. Part three is the activity itself. The key activities are decision-making, problem solving, and interacting, and these are the participants' responsibility. The teacher observes student performances and manages the activity as a "controller." Stage four, optional when working with elementary learners, consists of a debriefing where the activity is evaluated and the interaction discussed. The teacher helps students understand the exercise, review the language used, and build on weaknesses.

What Needs to Go into a Simulation?

Many teachers like to write or adapt existing simulations for the needs and proficiencies of their particular students. Perhaps the most difficult step is determining a general objective and specifying the concrete objectives that form the basis of the simulation. An overall objective might be to enable students to perform well in a job interview, develop discussion skills, practise offering and taking advice, write formal reports, or order food in a restaurant. Such objectives allow specific areas to be isolated and incorporated, remembering that the purpose of the activity is to allow learners to use language in a real context. In the simplest terms, simulation design involves answering 13 questions, an approach that can also be used to help students write a simulation. The steps are given in Figure 3.

Figure 3 - Aspects of Writing a Simulation

1. What do I want my students to know, to do, or to learn?
2. What is the event to be simulated?
3. What is the problem to be resolved?
4. What are the participants' roles and how are they grouped?
5. What goals do the participants have? How do the relate to each other?
6. What information does each participant have? (often there needs to be an information gap.)
7. How is the event conducted, by whom, and for how long?
8. What background information do the participants need?
9. What particular nexis, structures, or language skills are needed, if any, to make the simulation successful?
10. What materials or props are required, if any?
11. What tasks can be given to early finishers?
12. What questions should be asked in the debriefing?
13. What follow up work or future simulations are are suggested?

How Can I Prepare Students for a Simulation?

Students are often nervous or shy when first asked to participate in a simulation, and it is worthwhile considering this problem before it occurs. This kind of reticence can be due to the individual personalities of the students, but is often the result of student expectations about learning and what they consider to be "proper" classroom behaviour. The problem may be addressed in three ways.

1. *Discussion and explanation*. Proficient students can be convinced by an explanation of the benefits of simulations, particularly in the fields of pilot instruction, the military, and management training. With intermediate-level students a presentation and discussion can have positive effects on participation.

2. *Familiarity with interactive learning*. Perhaps the best way to minimise nervousness is for students to be at ease with interactive learning methods. A learning environment in which pair

work, information-gap activities, cooperative tasks, and discussions play an important part is one that easily accommodates a simulation. Students will then be less inhibited by the idea of "suspending disbelief," getting out of their chairs and participating in a simulated reality. A series of short, simple roleplays or group-based tasks can prepare students for what to expect and lead them gradually into a wider activity (Porter-Ladousse 1987). Buzz-group discussions and socially oriented games are useful for breaking the ice and fostering communication, while roleplays can help encourage students to lose their self-consciousness. Journals such as English Teaching Forum and Modern English Teacher are rich sources of such ideas. Some simple examples are given in Figure 4.

Figure 4 - Initial Communication Activities:
Games, Roleplays, and Discussions

CHARADES
Teams guess the mime performed by another team.

20 QUESTIONS
Teams try to discover the "occupation" of a student by asking 20 yes/no questions.

ALIBI
A group is sent outside to prepare, and the members of the group are then interviewed separately in order to find discrepancies in their accounts of the same story.

RECEPTIONIST
Students try to communicate with a dumb hotel clerk who can only use gestures (Crookall et al. 1989)

WHAT DO YOU SAY?
Students are each given a piece of paper which briefly describes a (simple or involved) situation. The student has to respond in English.

BUZZ GROUPS
Students engage in small-group discussions that require a consensus solution to the problem. Familiar scenarios are "The dying planet" and "Moon survival" (Hyland 1989).

READING THE PART
Students work in pairs to note down the thoughts, ideas, and feeling of individuals involved in an event reported in a newspaper article (worried parent, politician, etc.). This encourages empathy and the idea that we all play roles in our daily lives (Porter-Ladousse 1987:34).

CELEBRITY INTRODUCTIONS
Individuals give a three-minute introduction to their favorite celebrity from music, film, literature, etc.

3. *Integration*. A third way of overcoming the reticence of learners is to encourage them to see simulations as an essential and integral part of their language syllabus. In this way students can

prepare for a simulation directly as an ongoing part of their course. There are two ways of approaching this.

One is by integrating the simulation into language coursework as the "free production" element of the "3P" approach, once appropriate language has been presented and practised. This requires careful selection of the simulation to ensure both that learners have control over the language required and that the situation is relevant to their linguistic needs. It is probably wise to minimise the amount of newly introduced language, however, for while some useful lexis may be introduced at the briefing stage, students cannot assimilate a great deal immediately. While attention will be focused on the new items then, language central to the simulation should be familiar to students. Until students are comfortable with simulations, it is a good idea to keep them short.

Alternatively, and perhaps preferably, minimal language work may be done initially and the simulation integrated into the course by providing an opportunity for students to consolidate the language they have acquired already. This enables learners to practise language they are confident with in realistic settings and to become aware of what they still need to learn in order to deal with particular communicative situations. The more ambitious teacher might then choose to build the entire course around a simulation. This establishes a coherent and meaningful framework for integrating language and communication skills while allowing students to work on a variety of tasks (Hyland and Hyland 1992).

How is a Simulation Run?

Teachers are often more anxious about running a simulation for the first time than students are about participating. We may be worried about the reactions of our students or those of our fellow teachers. It is true that simulations, like any other interactive learning method, need careful planning and classroom management. It is also true, however, that without the kind of integrated fluency practice that simulations allow, a vital aspect of learning will be missing from a student's progress towards mastering English to communicate. The question is therefore not whether to use simulations, but how to run them effectively.

The most important point in running a simulation is to believe that it is going to work! A number of suggestions to assist this are given below.

1. *Setting up*. Much of the preceding discussion has covered this area. The simulation should be carefully planned and chosen on the basis of issues that are likely to maximise motivation and language use. The emphasis is on creating believable situations that emphasise reality of context over language, and this may mean using resources not specifically designed for language work (Crookall 1984). There are many non-ELT simulations available that fit the bill. Essentially, the simulation needs to be carefully prepared along the lines given in Figure 3, and the students should be comfortable with the idea of interactive learning through simple information-gap roleplays and the kinds of activities discussed in the previous section. If possible, it is worthwhile watching a simulation in action before having a go yourself.

2. *Getting going*. Once the simulation has been selected or written, the students can be introduced to the central ideas of the activity and encouraged to discuss them. Participants must understand the nature of the task, their roles, and the constraints of the environment. Often roles involve particular students working together, and current opinion suggests that these groups should generally reflect a well-balanced mixed-ability organisation (Byrne 1987). Information should be kept as brief and simple as possible to avoid confusion, but can be given as homework texts or in the native language to help speed understanding of what is involved. Assimilation can also be assisted by active involvement. If learners can research the background of the issue in a library, write letters to companies, or conduct small opinion polls among the local population, then so much the better. A variety of listening and reading exercises will reinforce the transfer of information and generate motivation, particularly if learners recognise they are developing useful skills. Any specialist vocabulary and expressions should be introduced at this stage.

3. *Managing the activity*. Fluency work demands that the teacher disengage from the governing role and allow learners to produce and interpret language on their own. Once the simulation is underway, the teacher becomes an activity manager, advising and monitoring the learning environment (Hyland 1991). Apart from the vital organisational function of time-management, and ensuring that those finishing early have something to do, organising during the activity should be handled by the students themselves. During the simulation the teacher becomes a roving observer, intervening when requested to act as an informant on the language or scenario, but otherwise simply collecting data to share in the debriefing. Overt error correction should be avoided and mistakes noted for discussion later.

4. *Winding down*. The observer role puts the teacher in a good position to provide a systematic review of events at the end of the simulation. While this is an essential part of Ll simulations, it may inhibit L2 participants or be beyond their linguistic abilities, and can be dispensed with if the teacher feels this is best.

The main contributors to the debriefing should be the participants, with the teacher providing a structure for this. Students can clarify their own parts in the simulation, their perception of the task, and their contributions, reflecting on their actions and mistakes. Who participated? Who didn't? Who performed well? Why did a group make a particular choice rather than another? How could the event be improved? It is important not to allow the negative to predominate. This is another communicative language opportunity for students and should be approached positively rather than critically. During the language debriefing the teacher takes a more directive and teaching role, as this explores what was said and what was not said because the students did not have appropriate language skills (Bullard 1990). It is a good idea to focus on the communicative effectiveness of the language used and have a number of general issues in mind to discuss. The content of the language debriefing may be determined by the next stage of the syllabus or remedial urgency, but its relationship to student needs is certain to be more apparent to the learners than if it is simply based on a textbook course.

5. *Assessing students*. Students can be assessed in a variety of ways, depending on the purpose of the activity. Generally, however, assessment will be based on how students have performed on individual tasks and on their participation and contribution to the group effort. Where the simulation results in a product, such as a diary, report, oral presentation, news bulletin, etc.,

students can be allocated marks for this. If this product is a joint effort, a group mark can be allocated to each member, or the group itself can be asked to fairly share an allocated mark among its members. In other cases the quality of the student's work on task, the effectiveness of communication, the degree of participation, and the appropriacy of the group solution to the activity can provide a basis for assessment.

Where Can I Find Useful ELT Simulations?

Simulations can be relatively difficult to find. Some of the most accessible and useful for ELT/ESP are listed below.

COLLECTIONS AND PRACTICAL IDEAS

Designing Your Own Simulations, by Ken Jones (Methuen, 1985).

Not a collection but a practical book on planning and designing simulations.

Drama Techniques in Language Learning: A Resource Book of Communicative Activities for Language Teachers, 2nd ed., by A. Maley and A. Duff (Cambridge University Press, 1982).

Some 200 drama-based activities for ELT.

Eight Simulations for Upper Intermediate and More Advanced Students of English, by Leo Jones (Cambridge University Press, 1983).

Includes helpful assistance for teachers and suggestions for language exercises. (Topics include media, education, politics.)

Graded Simulations, by Ken Jones (Longman, 1985).

Three volumes of nine simulations covering a variety of topics and a range of complexity. General and language learning. (Topics include media, interviews, world events.)

Imaginary Crimes: Materials for Simulation and Role Playing, by R. Clark and J. McDonough (Pergamon, 1982).

Eight language-learning roleplays for courtroom scenarios. Includes language activities (intermediate level).

Out of the In-Tray, by J. Farthing (St Albans, 1982).

Ready to use work-based simulations/ roleplays.

Role Play, by Gillian Porter-Ladousse (Oxford University Press, 1987).

Excellent collection of roleplays and simple simulations for all ability levels. Guidance for teachers and plenty of good ideas.

Simulations: A Handbook for Teachers, 2nd ed., by Ken Jones (Kogan Page, 1987).

A practical book on the selection, use, and running of simulations.

Six Simulations, by Ken Jones (Blackwell, 1987).

Similar to Designing Your Own Simulations.

GROUPS AND JOURNALS

There are a number of associations devoted to simulations. Their regular newsletters and journals offer the best source of up-to-date information on simulations and game materials. The two main organisations are:

ISAGA (International Simulation and Gaming Association).

This international association has regional groups in all parts of the world. It publishes a newsletter and an academic journal, Simulation and Gaming: An International Journal of Theory, Design and Research, available through membership or Sage Publications. Its address is ISAGA General Secretariat, Dept. of Social Science, State University of Utrecht, P.O. Box 80.140, 3584, Utrecht, Netherlands.

SAGSET (Society for the Advancement of Games and Simulations in Education and Training).

British-based body with a practical journal, Simulations/Games for Learning (Kogan Page). SAGSET also produces regular lists of available simulation resources for members. Its address is The Secretary, SAGSET, Centre for Extension Studies, University of Technology, Loughborough LE11 3TU, Leicester, U.K.

Conclusion

The principal advantage of the simulation technique for language learning is that it provides students with a realistic environment in which they can develop a range of communicative and interactive skills. Learners need to use the linguistic system creatively and appropriately if they are to obtain proficiency in English, and as a result simulations are particularly useful in contexts where students have few opportunities for contact with native speakers. Realistic, high-output communication practice in the classroom is essential for all students, however, because it represents a pedagogically necessary stage in the learners' ability to transfer formal classroom learning to the real world. While they may seem a daunting prospect to teachers unfamiliar with them, simulations deserve a central place in our repertoire of language-teaching methods.

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